

## Invisible barriers and sustainable careers: a theoretical essay to understand careers in context

*Barreiras invisíveis e carreiras sustentáveis: um ensaio teórico para entender carreiras em contexto*

*Barreras invisibles y carreras sostenibles: un ensayo teórico para entender las carreras en su contexto*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This theoretical essay aims to expand the contextual dimension of the concept of sustainable careers by including elements that enable the examination of structural inequalities characterizing the Brazilian labor market and other similar socioeconomic realities. **Methodology:** We conducted a theoretical essay that establishes connections between the fundamental dimensions of the sustainable career concept (time, context, agency, and meaning) and the expanded notion of context, including levels related to work, origin, society, culture, and the global sphere. **Results:** The study presents an expanded model of context that reveals invisible barriers interfering with career sustainability. Additionally, we propose directions for studies to explore diverse contexts. **Conclusions:** An expanded perspective of context allows for understanding the reality of countries with conditions of social inequality, such as Brazil. In this sense, the gap in contextual perspectives in career research, traditionally focused on approaches with individual emphasis, is filled.

**Keywords:** Careers. Context. Sustainable careers. Social sustainability. Sustainability;

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este ensaio teórico tem como objetivo ampliar a dimensão contexto no conceito de carreira sustentável, incluindo elementos que permitam acessar as desigualdades estruturais que caracterizam o mercado de trabalho brasileiro e outras realidades socioeconômicas similares. **Metodologia:** Foi realizado um ensaio teórico que faz interlocuções entre as dimensões fundamentais do conceito de carreira sustentável (tempo, contexto, agência e sentido) com a noção expandida de contexto que níveis relativos ao trabalho, origem, sociedade e cultura e global. **Resultados:** O estudo apresenta um modelo expandido de contexto que permite revelar barreiras invisíveis que interferem na sustentabilidade das carreiras. Além disso, propõe-se pontos de reflexão e direcionamentos para estudos que abrem espaço para explorar contextos diversos. **Conclusões:** Uma perspectiva expandida de contexto permite compreender a realidade de países com condições de desigualdade social, como o Brasil. Nesse sentido, preenche-se a lacuna de perspectivas contextuais nas pesquisas em carreira, tradicionalmente centrada em abordagens com ênfase individual.

**Palavras-chaves:** Carreiras. Contexto. Carreira sustentável. Sustentabilidade social. Sustentabilidade.

## RESUMEM

**Objetivo:** Este ensaio teórico tiene como objetivo ampliar la dimensión contextual del concepto de carrera sostenible, incorporando elementos que permitan el análisis de las desigualdades estructurales que caracterizan el mercado laboral brasileño y otras realidades socioeconómicas similares. **Metodología:** Se realizó un ensayo teórico que realiza interlocuciones entre las dimensiones fundamentales del concepto de carrera sostenible (tiempo, contexto, agencia y significado) con la noción ampliada de contexto que nivela lo relativo al trabajo, origen, sociedad y cultura y lo global. **Resultados:** El estudio presenta un modelo ampliado de contexto que permite revelar las barreras invisibles que interfieren en la sostenibilidad de las carreras profesionales. También propone puntos de reflexión y direcciones para estudios que abren espacio para explorar diferentes contextos. **Conclusiones:** Una perspectiva ampliada del contexto permite comprender la realidad de países con condiciones de desigualdad social, como Brasil. En este sentido, llena el vacío de perspectivas contextuales en la investigación de carreras, tradicionalmente centrada en abordajes con énfasis individual.

**Palabras clave:** Carreras profesionales. Contexto. Carreras sostenibles. Sostenibilidad social. Sostenibilidad.

## ■ INTRODUCTION

This essay is grounded in a theoretical proposal that connects the concept of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) with the definition of context developed by Mayrhofer et al. (2007), which is regarded as seminal within the contextual perspective on careers (Gunz et al., 2011; Tams et al., 2021). The aim is to broaden the notion of context within the concept of sustainable careers by incorporating elements that make it possible to address the structural inequalities that characterize the Brazilian labor market.

The concept of a sustainable career may be defined as “sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7). The focus on sustainability arises from the recognition of the growing complexity, unpredictability, and accelerated pace of change in the world of work, which threatens the continuity of careers (Greenhaus et al., 2024). Discussions on this theme involve concerns with work ability, referring to the social, psychological, and organizational conditions that shape the capacity for work in the medium and long term (De Lange et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2015); or they emphasize the development of a form of employability that safeguards and fosters both human development and career growth (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; De Vos et al., 2020).

As a theoretical lens, the sustainability perspective enables a dynamic and systemic understanding of careers based on the interaction between actors and contexts (De Vos et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2022), and, at the individual level, on how these conditions facilitate opportunities for decent work in the present and the future (Greenhaus et al., 2024). The concept thus assumes assumptions of entanglement and interdependence between agency and context, which represents an advancement over the dominant perspectives in the field (De Vos et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2015), traditionally centered on individual action (Akkermans et al., 2021).

In practice, however, what becomes evident is the need to explore further the contextual dimensions that affect career sustainability. Research on sustainable careers remains centered mainly on the individual or confined to the organizational environment (Müller et al., 2022), without engaging with the multiplicity of factors that shape career trajectories (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). One explanation for this gap lies in the constructs commonly employed to analyze employability, which is typically defined as an individual’s ability to obtain and retain employment (Forrier et al., 2018), while neglecting contextual elements that hinder access to and continuity in the labor market (Peeters et al., 2019). Even discussions on work ability tend to hold individuals accountable for behavioral change in the face of adverse organizational conditions, without addressing broader systemic configurations that undermine well-being at work (Aalbers & De Lange, 2015; De Lange et al., 2015).

In this theoretical essay, we argue that the concept of context proposed by Mayrhofer et al. (2007) helps to advance these debates by incorporating elements that expose the structural inequalities of the labor market. Mayrhofer et al. (2007) define context across four primary levels: the context of work, which encompasses labor markets, new forms of organization, and social relations; the context of origin, which considers the influence of social class, socialization, and education; the context of society and culture, which includes gender, ethnicity, and community; and the global context, which captures internationalization and the virtualization of relations. These levels operate simultaneously, shaping individuals' career choices and opportunities, and thereby broadening the perspective beyond an exclusive focus on individual capacity for employability and work ability as typically addressed in sustainable career research (Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

This study aligns with the call for contextual perspectives in the understanding of careers. A critical strand of research (Cohen & Duberley, 2015; Gunz et al., 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2007) argues that career theories have been constructed around a homogeneous group of "white-collar" workers (Cohen & Duberley, 2015), which fails to reflect the vast diversity of the labor force. For instance, studies indicate (Friedman et al., 2016; Laurison & Friedman, 2016) that social markers such as gender, class, race, and other structural factors determine individuals' positions within the social division of labor and the broader stratification of the system (Bal et al., 2021). Overlooking these contexts not only downplays inequalities (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020) but also conceals structural barriers that are present yet remain underexplored—or even ignored—within dominant career research (Bal et al., 2021).

From the perspective of sustainable careers, there remain significant gaps in studies that account for contextual specificities. According to Bal et al. (2021), the very notion of a sustainable career is imbued with a utopian ideology, one in which sustainability is framed as a matter of personal choice, presupposing that individuals are free to be flexible, to find meaning in work, and to exercise individual agency. Within this conception, sustainable careers would only be attainable in regions with higher levels of political and socio-economic stability—conditions that differ substantially between the Global North and Global South (Bal et al., 2022; Hickel, 2014). In countries of the Global South, marked by systemic unemployment and profound social inequality, such as Brazil (Antunes, 2016), the very feasibility of conceiving sustainable careers must be reconsidered. This issue underscores the urgency of engaging with contextual elements that remain underexplored within the concept of sustainable careers, particularly those related to social markers of difference.

By addressing these gaps, this essay offers a theoretical contribution by providing a lens that makes visible the contextual barriers linked to inequalities in employment opportunities. The study presents directions for future research aimed at capturing the particularities of the Brazilian context and other countries with similar conditions. Analyzing these relationships can also generate practical insights into the difficulties faced by specific groups in sustaining their career trajectories. Thus, the reflections advanced in this essay may serve as a foundation for both organizational and public policies that consider the diversities that characterize contemporary careers.

In addition to this introduction, the article is structured as follows. First, we show the methodology that guided the development of this theo-

retical essay. Then, we establish a dialogue between the sustainable career concept and the study of Mayrhofer et al. (2007) to deepen the understanding of context. Finally, we propose an expansion of the processual model of sustainable careers, followed by reflections and research directions, and concluding remarks.

## METHOD

The theoretical essay is a form of research characterized by a freer structure and less reliance on rigid formal organization, prioritizing the content necessary for knowledge construction. This format allows for the inclusion of preliminary or partial reflections that can stimulate further inquiry into the object of analysis, without the requirement of presenting a fully developed system of thought (Meneghetti, 2011).

This theoretical essay aims to produce reflections on the unexplored contexts in career research, constructed from the articulation of the concept of sustainable career (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015) with the notion of context developed by Mayrhofer et al. (2007). These constructs were chosen because they are seminal in the research on career sustainability (Greenhaus et al., 2024) and in the contextual perspective of careers, respectively (Gunz et al., 2011; Tams et al., 2021). We meticulously analyzed the theoretical references of these studies, seeking new correlated references to support the proposed argument. To facilitate this process, a systematic literature review that traced the origins of the discussion on career sustainability was also consulted (Müller et al., 2022).

Additionally, free searches were conducted on the Web of Science and Scopus databases, the primary bibliographic sources for research on sustainable careers, during the years 2023, later reinforced in 2024 and 2025. In these searches, variations of the terms “career and gender,” “career and social class,” and “career and race” were adopted. Texts from various fields of knowledge pertinent to the field of career research (Akkermans et al., 2021), such as sociology and organizational psychology, were included. This process aimed to identify references that support contemporary studies addressing the discussion of social markers, including mainly studies with repeated mention in the research. We also emphasize that our objective was not to conduct a systematic literature review, but rather to seek a foundation to promote a critical understanding of the career-context relationship and its interaction with the concept of a sustainable career.

## SUSTAINABLE CAREERS AND CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS

The concept of sustainable careers proposes understanding careers through the dimensions of time, context, agency, and meaning. Time emphasizes the dynamic nature of careers, which evolve under the constant influence of experiences encountered throughout the construction of professional trajectories (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Context is understood as a determinant of career movements and behaviors (Johns, 2001), both influencing and being influenced by the individual. Agency refers

to the individual's capacity to steer their career, either in a more adaptive (reactive) manner when responding to changes, or proactively, when contextual conditions allow greater control over career trajectories (De Vos et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2022). Meaning, as a guiding dimension of individual actions, pertains to the significance attributed to career development, which emerges from the interaction between individual and context over time (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

The concept of sustainable careers encompasses two main elements: employability and work ability (Lawrence et al., 2015). Employability, in a broad sense, refers to workers' capacity, in any society, to obtain employment or enter the labor market in the short and long term; at an individual level, it pertains to the mobilization of personal resources to remain in the labor market (Lawrence et al., 2015). Work ability, in turn, refers to the physical, psychological, and social conditions that affect one's capacity to work (Ilmarinen, 2001; Ilmarinen et al., 2005). This concept extends the discussion of employability by emphasizing the "capacity to work in the present and near future, taking into account the worker's physical and cognitive resources, in conjunction with the demands imposed at the work, occupational, and broader job levels" (Aalbers & De Lange, 2015, p. 245). Work ability, therefore, involves balancing personal resources—physical, cognitive, psychological, and social capacities—with labor demands (Ilmarinen et al., 2005).

The sustainability perspective is linked to the notion of career continuity (Lawrence et al., 2015; McDonald et al., 2022), considering how experiences and events are perceived and interpreted by individuals (De Vos et al., 2020). This perspective considers not only professional demands but also elements fundamental to individual well-being across the various contexts that shape career trajectories. These elements are captured through three core indicators of career sustainability: health, referring to individual well-being, including mental and physical health; happiness, associated with career satisfaction and success; and productivity, relating to performance within a given occupational domain and the capacity to develop competencies for sustained participation in the labor market (De Vos et al., 2020; Greenhaus et al., 2024). While productivity aligns with discussions of employability, health and happiness are more closely connected to the concept of work ability (Chin et al., 2022).

Regarding context, the sustainable career concept emphasizes the influence of several key elements: work groups, including the impact of work demands (e.g., the effect of workload on mental health); the organizational environment, which may facilitate or hinder sustainable careers—for instance, the role of organizational culture and climate in fostering a diversity-supportive environment; organizational context, particularly the implementation of human resource policies and practices that create opportunities or impose barriers for career development, flexibility, or advancement; occupational and institutional sector context, referring to the influence of the conditions within a specific field on career sustainability (for example, the impact of digital transformation on manual tasks that can be automated); national context, highlighting specific legislation, labor union representation, or other country-specific conditions such as access to education and culture; and finally, private life context, concerning the influence of family, relatives, and friends on career decisions (De Vos et al., 2020).

The concept of sustainable careers assumes a systemic and dynamic relationship among these contexts throughout a career, characterized by cycles of greater or lesser sustainability depending on the outcomes of the individual–context interaction. At certain times and in specific contexts, individuals may experience career trajectories that they perceive as positive or negative. These cycles are associated with higher or lower career satisfaction (happiness indicator); perceived subjective well-being or physical and mental health challenges (health indicator); and perceived employability or high/low work performance (productivity indicator) (Curado et al., 2023; De Vos et al., 2020).

## ■ SUSTAINABLE CAREERS: POSSIBILITIES FOR CONTEXTUAL EXPANSION AND THEORETICAL ARTICULATIONS

Mayrhofer et al. (2007) analyzed theoretical and empirical studies on contextual elements that influence career-related aspects, as presented in the *Academy of Management* from 1950 through the first decade of the twenty-first century. From this analysis, they identified four mutually influential levels affecting careers: the context of work, encompassing external labor market issues, new forms of work and organizations, and social relationships; the context of origin, emphasizing social class, education and socialization, work history, and current life circumstances; the context of society and culture, constituted by elements such as gender, ethnicity, demographics, and community; and the global context, relating to issues of internationalization and virtualization (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). These levels influence careers in a manner likened to an “onion peel”, composed of multiple layers (Mayrhofer et al., 2007, p. 216).

The most immediate context for the individual is the context of work, which encompasses the external labor market, including legal and economic frameworks, as well as the characteristics of specific markets or occupations that structure career opportunities. It includes labor market segmentation and stratification, with career-related aspects such as earnings, wages, and mobility. It also involves new configurations of work and organizations, such as labor market flexibilization, emerging forms of work organization (e.g., freelancers, part-time workers, self-employed), the influence of government policies, precarious work, and new types of organizations (networked or virtual). Additionally, it considers social relationships, understood as networks of contacts and relationships within the workplace, both internal and external to organizations (Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

The context of work is the dimension most prominently addressed in the concept of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) and in existing studies on career sustainability, which, when discussing contextual perspectives, remain confined mainly to organizational environments (Müller et al., 2022; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). It underscores the limitations of the current perspective, given the diversity of contextual elements that are overlooked (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). These limitations present opportunities for both theoretical and empirical exploration, which will be addressed in the following sections.

## ■ THE CONTEXT OF ORIGIN

Regarding the context of origin, Mayrhofer et al. (2007) highlight the influence of class, social background, educational socialization, and work history on career objectives, workplace behaviors, and retirement. The influence of class and social origin on careers is addressed in two ways: at the macro level, aiming to understand the extent to which these factors affect career development and success, and at a more general level, analyzing the possibilities they condition regarding inter- and intra-organizational mobility. The second aspect relates to social stratification, which, especially in industrial societies, derives from differences in ownership and control of material resources, access to education, and employment opportunities (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). A potential intersection between these themes can be explored through the concepts of class and social stratification as proposed by Weber (2004; 1982) and Bourdieu (1983; 2007). Their key analytical points are summarized below.

The temporal dimension provides a historical perspective on the concept of career, allowing for the exploration of intergenerational influences on professional trajectories, which can inform reflections on future directions and present career situations (Greenhaus et al., 2024). Fouad et al. (2012) analyzed the influence of family on students' career choices and suggested that social class plays an important role in individual aspirations and occupational choices. Career guidance occurs both through direct encouragement to pursue certain occupations and through the lack of financial support for higher levels of education due to family economic conditions. Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2014) note that middle-class parents leverage social and cultural capital to influence their children's education and seek better opportunities for them. Thus, social class of origin is connected to the past and contributes to prospects—a temporal dimension that can extend beyond the span of an individual career.

Within this perspective, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011) indicate that, although less directly representative, the social class of origin affects the level of qualification required for entry into and advancement within the labor market (employability). Laurison and Friedman (2016) highlight the dual effect of discrimination: traditional professions (such as medicine, law, among others) are dominated by children of parents with similar educational backgrounds or more technical occupations, and working-class individuals who enter these professions earn less. In this way, a “social class ceiling” may exist, where talent and success are highly dependent on the availability of economic, social, and cultural capital (Friedman et al., 2016). Incorporating this dimension into the concept of sustainable careers would therefore allow progress in addressing these issues and enable a more comprehensive analysis of career peculiarities, such as those observed in Brazil.

Another contribution that can lead to important considerations for the concept of sustainable careers is the reference to the meanings attributed to career and work. The construction of meaning is directly linked to the process of socialization, related to class habitus, how meanings are constructed and shared. Bourdieu (2007) conceptualizes “habitus” as a socialized subjectivity, to be understood as a set of schemes of perception, appropriation, and action, which are experienced and put into practice within the circumstances of a field that elicits them. Thinking about the relationship between individual and society through the lens of habitus implies recognizing

that the “individual, personal, and subjective are simultaneously social and collectively orchestrated” (Setton, 2002, p. 64).

Abrantes (2013) emphasizes that socialization spaces (family, work, church, and military) construct both pride and limitations that define class structure, forming an identity that shapes the meanings attributed to work. The educational system, a structural element that could, in some cases, break with the habitus constructed in the family, often ends up reinforcing class differentiation. Thompson and Subich (2013) explore how class-based discrimination (classism) manifests during higher education, creating differentiated spaces within the same program. Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2014) show that some schools provide differentiated pathways for children from elite backgrounds, offering more course options and opportunities, thereby shaping diverse educational experiences for different classes within the same institution. These distinctions persist in the labor market, as evidenced by Laurison and Friedman (2016). Thus, career meanings may be closely linked to class habitus, creating a segmentation of opportunities within the labor market.

Finally, social class affects the possibilities for agency, as it is “assigned to individuals at birth based on the class status of their family of origin” (Jones, 2003, pp. 803–804). Moreover, social markers such as race, gender, and sexuality further complicate class analysis (Jones, 2003; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020) and can represent “aggravating factors” that condition any form of mobility within the labor market. In this way, individual action is also constrained by different forms of segmentation and social stratification, which, through exclusion from certain types of work, consequently, create privileged professions. This critique is present in Brazilian studies that underpin critical perspectives on individual employability (Balassiano et al., 2005; Helal, 2005), which, similarly inspired by Bourdieu’s work (2007; 1983), highlight elements of the origin context as barriers to the acquisition of human capital, thereby restricting access to career opportunities. The literature on sustainable careers, therefore, does not engage with sociological issues of class, representing both a theoretical gap and an opportunity for advancement in the discussion through the inclusion of these perspectives.

## ■ THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE

In the context of society and culture, Mayrhofer et al. (2007) highlight several issues. Regarding ethnicity, studies include analyses of racial discrimination or discrimination against members of ethnic minorities, the relationship between ethnic aspects and managerial positions, promotion potential, career success, opportunities for organizational experience, wage differences between white and Black individuals, and the influence of demographic position on access to employment. Concerning gender, over the years, research has focused mainly on differences in work experiences between men and women, such as income inequality, labor market participation, and promotion patterns. Studies on demographics associate age, gender, and ethnicity with various organizational aspects, including turnover, internal labor markets, mobility and career outcomes, work processes and results, composition of corporate elites, perceptions and consequences of age, and workforce planning from

a demographic perspective. Finally, the “community” element involves the influence of an individual’s integration into the local organizational context on careers, considering civil, political, and religious spheres (Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

Within the field of sustainable careers, some studies have made tentative efforts to advance these elements. Mauno et al. (2015), for example, highlight the urgency for researchers, who are responsible for public policy formulation, to analyze which groups are most disadvantaged under certain work conditions—such as part-time or contingent employment (Barley et al., 2017)—while cautiously considering the various factors that influence career trajectories, including gender, class, family social background, and demographic characteristics of a given region (Mauno et al., 2015). At the organizational level, Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre (2020) discuss the need to incorporate gender issues and key characteristics of regions and countries to implement practices aimed at career and work sustainability effectively. Despite these efforts, analyses of the current state of the field identify theoretical gaps in these aspects (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020).

Regarding the Brazilian context, gender constitutes an important social marker in the construction of careers. Currently, women represent the majority of the population with higher education in Brazil (OECD, 2022). Despite their increased participation in the labor market and a growing presence in leadership positions, women continue to face numerous barriers and challenges within organizations, especially in those that are predominantly male-dominated (Loureiro et al., 2012; Cembranel et al., 2021; Oliveira-Silva & Parreira, 2022).

Studies addressing the barriers women face in career development often employ metaphors to visually illustrate the challenges encountered, the most well-known being the glass ceiling analogy. In this metaphor, the ceiling symbolizes an insurmountable barrier to women’s advancement to top organizational positions, while the glass refers to transparency, indicating that these impediments are not easily visible from a distance (Carli & Eagly, 2016). However, with the increased participation of women in organizations, forms of discrimination have evolved, and new metaphors have emerged to describe these barriers, such as the labyrinth—numerous obstacles women face in their careers, though some manage to reach the top; sticky floor—women are prevented from advancing beyond entry-level positions; glass cliff—accepting risky leadership roles; and glass chains—the influence of religion and personal faith on career development (Arifeen & Gatrell, 2020; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Darouei & Pluut, 2018; Deschacht et al., 2017).

Traditional family arrangements and the insufficiency of public policies lead women to devote more time than men to caregiving and domestic tasks, particularly those with young children (IBGE, 2025). Consequently, other recurring topics in research on women’s careers include motherhood (Arena et al., 2023), dual-career couples (Mutter & Thorn, 2019), work–family conflict and the pursuit of work–life balance (Powell et al., 2019), and women leaving the labor market to devote themselves to family, in the phenomenon known as opting out (Kossek et al., 2017).

Some criticisms are addressed in these studies. Organizations are often described as gender-neutral, which does not reflect reality, since the abstract worker is assumed to be male, and his behaviors, emotions, and

perspectives are adopted as representative of the human experience (Acker, 1990). Discriminations that delimit women's spheres of action are frequently justified by biologically distinct characteristics between men and women, particularly regarding women's reproductive capacity (Piscitelli, 2009). These differences, considered innate, are used to justify the unequal distribution of power between men and women and to naturalize distinct social spaces for each gender (Piscitelli, 2009). The concept of gender, therefore, refers to the notion that women are allocated to specific roles according to social conventions rather than biological determinism (Scott, 2012).

The term "gender" refers to the social construction of subjective identities of men and women, the distribution of power in society, and the roles assigned to each within this cultural framework, which leads to the naturalization of political, social, and economic inequalities between the sexes (Scott, 2012). In this way, gender can be considered a central category of inequality, and all members of a society can consciously or unconsciously produce and reproduce these distinctions (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). Addressing gender as an external condition that influences careers and organizations implies understanding it as a factor that can impact individual agency and, consequently, career sustainability.

Despite recent advances in diversity management studies, research on racial inequalities remains scarce in national management studies (Coelho Júnior & Hein, 2021). Within the social sciences, races are considered a social and political construct, "an instrument of domination and exclusion," as they do not exist biologically (Coelho Júnior & Hein, 2021, p. 2; Guimarães, 2003). In this context, racial inequalities reveal the greater socioeconomic vulnerability of Black, Brown, and Indigenous populations in Brazil, which is essential for the analysis of social inequalities (IBGE, 2022). Although Black and Brown individuals represent 56.1% of the Brazilian population, they are overrepresented in unemployment, underemployment, and informal work conditions generally associated with precariousness and lack of social protection (IBGE, 2022). Furthermore, the average monthly income of Black and Brown individuals is lower than that of white individuals, regardless of education level (IBGE, 2022). In this context, studies addressing the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and other relevant social markers in individual career development, the concept of structural racism (Almeida, 2019), and its implications for career sustainability remain underexplored both nationally and internationally.

## ■ GLOBAL CONTEXT

In the global context, Mayrhofer et al. (2007) consider the influence of phenomena resulting from internationalization and their consequences for individual careers. New forms of organizations (Barley et al., 2017), flexible work arrangements, and the extensive influence of actors across nations establish global configurations of work, including the need for continuous upskilling to keep pace with innovations and market demands (Lawrence et al., 2015). The emergence of workers in the gig economy, characterized by platform-mediated work with no direct contact with the employer (Barley et al., 2017), is also a relevant factor, alongside economic crises and rising unemployment rates. Virtualization fits within this global context, reflected

in the rise of virtual organizations and their specific professional and occupational demands, as well as the implementation of technologies that remove geographic barriers and redefine the scope of individual careers from a global perspective (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). Phenomena associated with globalization were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted profound changes in how people think about and conduct their professional trajectories (McDonald et al., 2022).

However, the so-called global characteristics of work take on differentiated configurations depending on countries' positions within the global logic of capital accumulation. Some countries occupy peripheral positions, resulting in more precarious working conditions, which are not considered in leading studies on sustainable careers (Bal et al., 2022). For example, countries in Latin America experience a general scenario of precarious contracts, unstable income, lack of social security, and greater economic vulnerability (UN, 2025). In contrast, in the Netherlands, where most major studies on sustainable careers have been conducted, significant advances have been achieved regarding work quality (Greenhaus et al., 2024).

Another critical issue is the economic and social impact of wars, which has led people to flee in search of asylum. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021), approximately 89.3 million people worldwide are forced to leave their countries due to war-related situations. In Brazil, the United Nations Refugee Agency (ACNUR, 2021) has recorded around 60,000 refugees since 1985, the majority coming from Venezuela, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola. In 2021, an additional 3,086 applications for refugee status were confirmed, most from Venezuela and Cuba (ACNUR, 2021). Informality and precarious working conditions are characteristic of refugee career trajectories, even in contexts with public policies that support these movements (Richardson et al., 2019). This context creates specific configurations for labor markets and raises concerns for both social sustainability (at a broader level) and career sustainability, involving the responsibility of governmental actors.

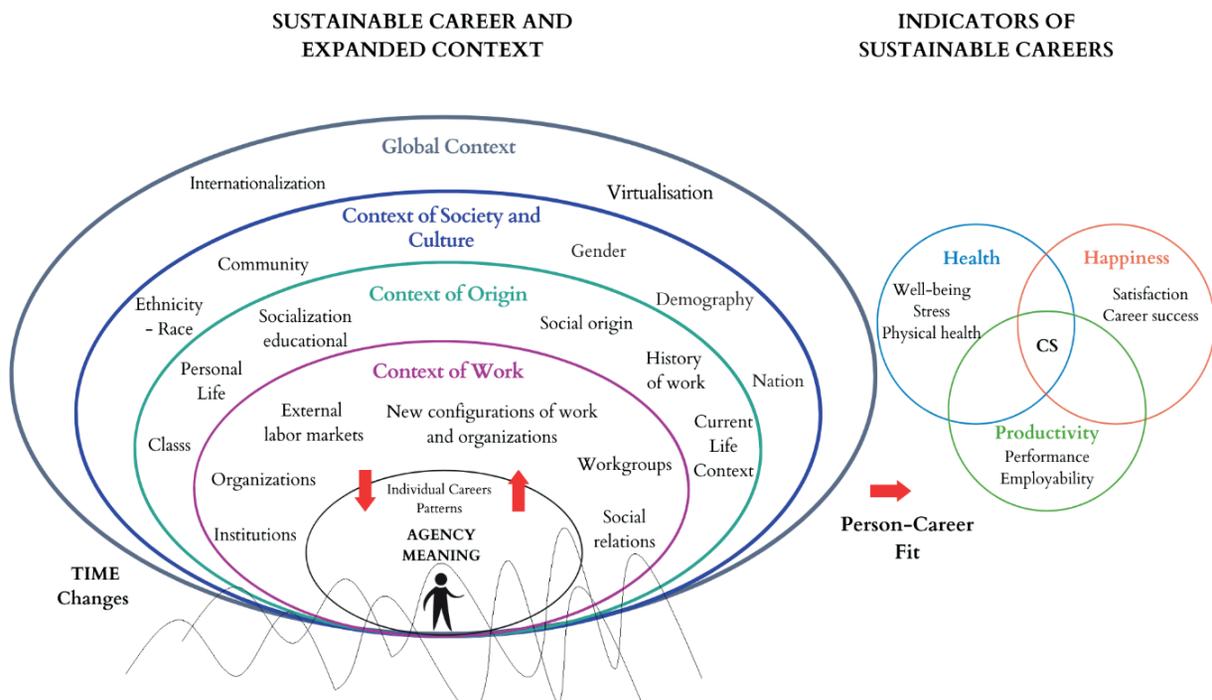
## ■ UNDERSTANDING CAREERS IN CONTEXT: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH IN SUSTAINABLE CAREERS

Careers are always careers in context. The individual and their capacity for agency are intertwined with the contexts in which they unfold, whether those are closer to the realities of work or inherent to structural dimensions. Accordingly, one's worldview is conditioned by a range of factors that shape the meanings attributed to careers and life itself (Chudzikowski et al., 2020), guiding actions, behaviors, and attitudes (Johns, 2001). These factors exist across different contexts, which can result in both visible and invisible barriers to career sustainability. Furthermore, historical conditions of inequality often create limitations and opportunities for access to work, which are frequently reproduced in labor relations due to the lack of a critical perspective on these contexts. To address these issues, we propose an expanded understanding of context within the sustainable career model based on the definition presented by Mayrhofer et al. (2007) (Figure 1).

The temporal dimension represents the dynamism of careers, driving movements of change aimed at career sustainability in response to experienced situations. Agency, guided by meaning, directs career trajectories, which, in turn, influence and are influenced by contexts that, at different levels, create barriers to career sustainability in the short, medium, and long term. This process involves person-career fit adjustments through adaptability (a more reactive form of agency in response to the context) and proactivity (a more active form of agency in response to the context), resulting in cycles that are more or less sustainable depending on how the individual experiences and perceives these contexts. Career sustainability is constituted as a non-linear continuum of trajectories, which allow continuity but fluctuate in terms of periods perceived as positive (more sustainable) or negative (less sustainable) (De Vos et al., 2020; Curado et al., 2023). This configuration even redefines the process of individual adaptability in contexts of vulnerability, which can take different forms that are open to exploration.

Figure 1

Sustainable Career and the Expanded Context



Note. Based on Mayrhofer et al. (2007) and De Vos et al. (2020).

Health, happiness, and productivity indicators also depend on the individual-context relationship, taking on different meanings. Some studies provide findings that reinforce these issues. Fouad et al. (2012) highlight the influence of race/ethnicity on perceptions of the capacity to succeed in one's career. Their study shows that ethnic minority groups, even when possessing the necessary skills for a successful career, do not feel capable of competing for opportunities in the labor market (Fouad et al., 2012). Emphasizing the cultural dimension, Andersen et al. (2017) underscore differences in career goals and conceptions of success across nationalities. This process impacts

how individuals seek experience for their careers and reinforces differences in the sustainability of trajectories. Similarly, the health dimension varies according to context. In countries such as Brazil, characterized by economic instability that exacerbates mental health issues (ILO, 2016), perceptions of employability are affected by the difficulty of obtaining decent work and sustainable employment (ILO, 2023). In contrast, in Europe, where populations are aging, the focus is on well-being measures that facilitate favorable working conditions (Greenhaus et al., 2024). Finally, productivity must also be contextualized. Mobility, increasingly considered a condition for greater employability (productivity), is shaped by gender issues. Women traditionally follow discontinuous career trajectories across multiple employers, without this translating into higher employability in the labor market (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Fraga and Rocha-de-Oliveira (2020, p. 765) further discuss the labyrinth formed by mobility that is “interrupted, expanded, or redirected by the constraints implied by social markers, notably gender,” a condition that challenges the conventional logic of employability.

Advancing these issues, Table 1 presents points for reflection that can guide thinking about careers in context, informing future research and practical implications based on its findings. It should be emphasized that contexts intersect and should not be considered in isolation, but as part of an interconnected and interdependent whole. Furthermore, these directions are suggestions rather than limitations and thinking beyond the points presented is explicitly encouraged.

As a methodological recommendation, approaches that allow longitudinal perspectives are suggested, particularly for analyses in changing contexts, enabling the capture of movements over time and/or observation of patterns and/or discontinuities, primarily through qualitative approaches. In this regard, the life history methodology is considered appropriate because it allows for the analysis of socio-historical-cultural aspects that are difficult to access through other methods (Pereira et al., 2017). Life history captures the narrator’s experience over time. From the narrative, it is possible to reconstruct events, reflecting the individual–context interaction from the perspective of the person recounting the trajectory (Lima, 2014; Pereira et al., 2017). Invisible barriers to sustainability, such as intergenerational issues reproduced from the influence of the context of origin, gender biases, and stigmas associated with social markers, can thus be accessed through this type of research.

Table 1

Possibilities for Integrating the Context of Society and Culture with Sustainable Careers

Points of Reflection	Research Directions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does family social class influence career aspirations?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze intergenerational patterns in the construction and sustainability of careers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do social markers of social class, gender, and race influence occupational choices?</li> <li>How do social markers of social class, gender, and race affect career adaptability? How does career adaptability become characterized?</li> <li>How do social class, gender, and race interfere with continuous access to job positions?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze social class and/or gender stigmas as barriers to building sustainable careers</li> <li>Analyze how career meanings are constructed and shared in different contexts of origin</li> <li>Analyze the influence of social markers of social class, gender, and race on career adaptability</li> <li>Analyze gender differences in how career meanings are constructed</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do the particularities of life history influence the possibility of balancing indicators of sustainable careers?</li> <li>How does the context of private life interfere with the meanings attributed to happiness and success?</li> <li>How do economic, political, and social configurations imply barriers and/or opportunities for career sustainability?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do the particularities of life history influence the possibility of balancing indicators of sustainable careers?</li> <li>How does the context of private life interfere with the meanings attributed to happiness and success?</li> <li>How do economic, political, and social configurations imply barriers and/or opportunities for career sustainability?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do social markers such as social class, gender, and race influence professional mobility within the perspective of sustainable careers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze relationships between the context of private life and the perception of happiness in careers.</li> <li>Analyze the indicators of career sustainability through comparative studies between different nationalities, regions, and/or cities.</li> <li>Analyze social class, gender, and social markers as barriers to global careers and/or professional mobility over time.</li> </ul>

**Note.** Based on the discussion developed.

Another possibility is the narrative method, which has been increasingly used in career studies (Chudzikowski et al., 2020; Duberley & Carrigan, 2013; Taylor & Savickas, 2016). Narratives serve as a means of organizing sequences of events into a coherent whole, allowing for a better understanding of each event's meaning in relation to the entire story (Elliott, 2005). Temporality is one of the main characteristics for understanding narrative form, as it begins with a specific event and unfolds the plot, unlike life history, which captures the broader biography of the narrator. By telling narratives, individuals make sense of their lived experiences, which express the interaction between the individual and the social spaces they engage with throughout life (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2012). This process is important for understanding different patterns of career experiences and how contexts influence career sustainability.

## ■ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aims to broaden the focus on the contextual dimension in studies of sustainable careers, highlighting aspects that are rarely considered in the dominant literature on the subject. Much has been said about the need to understand careers within context (Gunz et al., 2010; Tams et al., 2022), yet there remains a long way to go before this becomes the prevailing orientation in career studies. Accordingly, the discussions and directions explored

here encourage a plurality of perspectives for understanding the complexity involved in the construction and sustainability of careers.

As a theoretical contribution, opportunities are identified for the development of sustainable career theory by opening space for more contextual dimensions, particularly when considering countries with greater social inequality. An important reflection in this regard concerns the use of concepts from the Global North without critically examining their application in other cultures and realities. Even within the diversity of a single country, discrepancies in conditions can be observed. Brazil, for example, exhibits a vast population distribution and a diversity of socioeconomic conditions that differ from the relative homogenization of the major global economies (Bal et al., 2021). Life trajectories and histories, markers of race, class, and gender, as well as the locations where people live and work, possess unique conditions that influence the possibility of entering and remaining in a given labor market. These particularities underscore the importance of understanding careers within context (Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

Another relevant point is the reflection on the very dimension of sustainability. As a worldview, sustainability refers to the shared responsibility of actors in promoting contexts that support decent work (Docherty et al., 2009) and foster human and career development (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). In this sense, as practical implications, it is understood that the reflections emerging from this study can inform the development of organizational policies that promote career sustainability, particularly considering social markers such as class, gender, and race. In this direction, we suggest the following organizational actions: the creation of recruitment, selection, and career development programs targeting marginalized groups; the establishment of career sustainability indicators with a focus on diversity and inclusion, to monitor the presence and progression of these individuals within the organization; the training of leadership for management based on sustainable career principles; and partnerships with non-profit institutions and non-governmental organizations aimed at social inclusion or professional development of socially vulnerable groups.

In terms of social contributions, it is understood that the reflections provided by this study align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and can give rise to organizational actions with social impact (SDGs, 2025). In particular, they can support initiatives relevant to SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, by adopting the principles of sustainable careers as a management model that seeks to integrate quality of life and employability; SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, through inclusion initiatives within organizations that consider social markers of difference; and SDG 5 – Gender Equality, through specific actions aimed at the professional development of women within organizations and society.

The directions and premises presented serve as suggestions for conducting future research. The incorporation of discussions on social markers collectively represents an advance in career studies, and particularly in studies of sustainable careers. By presenting a macro-level overview of the contextual elements highlighted by Mayrhofer et al. (2007), the aim is to encourage the exploration of other contexts and/or social markers that are equally relevant to careers.

Finally, the study presents limitations regarding the social markers considered. There is a multiplicity of singularities that could be considered,

such as sexuality, religion, and demographic region, among other social markers (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), which impose barriers to the sustainability and development of careers. It should be emphasized, however, that the proposed model does not aim to limit the focus to gender, social class, and race, but rather to invite reflection on the invisible yet existing inequalities embedded in career trajectories.

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